

From: Steven Grimm
To: Microsoft ATR
Date: 1/23/02 2:50pm
Subject: Microsoft Settlement

I'm writing to express my displeasure with the proposed settlement with Microsoft. It fails to address a critical issue that will allow Microsoft to continue to shut out competitors: Microsoft's tendency to use proprietary, undocumented file formats for the output of its applications and its operating system components. I believe Microsoft should be required to fully document all its file formats. This will level the playing field in many Microsoft-dominated areas.

A simple but ubiquitous example is Microsoft Word. If I compose a Word document and send it to you, you have three choices. You can read it with your copy of Word (which means you'll have to go and buy Word). You can read it in a stripped-down, but still essentially correct, form using Windows' built-in Wordpad application. Or you can try to read it with StarOffice or another competing program. I say "try" because chances are if I've done anything unusual in the document, the non-Microsoft products won't be able to interpret it correctly and will give you garbled results. This is a direct consequence of the fact that the developers of competing applications must all reverse-engineer Microsoft's document format, and given the format's complexity, that's next to impossible to do perfectly.

Requiring Microsoft to document its file formats would allow competing developers to build tools that would interoperate with Microsoft's. And it wouldn't be a crippling blow to Microsoft; they would still be free to produce the most feature-rich, efficient software for reading their documents, and they'd be free to innovate as they saw fit, so long as the results of their innovation were made public.

There would be other important benefits as well. A lot of corporate and government documents will become lost to future historians if they're in a format that Microsoft has long since stopped supporting. Making the formats public means it will always be possible to go back and correctly decode old documents.

There are other problems with the settlement as well, but for me this one is the biggie, and without addressing this problem, Microsoft will be free to continue making minor changes to its ubiquitous file formats such that competing products don't work well enough to be usable.

Thanks for your time.

-Steven Grimm
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